

Notes on *Like a House on Fire*

SHORTLISTED FOR THE 2013 STELLA PRIZE



... a house on fire is a perfect description for what seems to be happening now: these flickering small resentments licking their way up into the wall cavities; this faint, acrid smell of smoke. And suddenly, before you know it, everything threatening to go roaring out of control.

Cate Kennedy, *Like a House on Fire*

SYNOPSIS

This collection of short stories catalogues moments from the dramatic to the mundane. In each story, though, there is an expansion of the characters beyond the roles that they have fallen into, an understanding of their own humanity which allows them to view the humanity in others. The collection inspires compassion and considers the impact of time and expectation on our relationships.

Flexion – A woman witnesses what she believes will be the death of her husband as he is crushed under their tractor. He survives, a harsh man who is unable to show gratitude towards the kindness of others, unable to ask for help, unable to show weakness or to tolerate perceived weakness. His wife takes an almost cruel satisfaction in becoming the dominant one in the relationship, until a moment of genuine warmth and shared understanding happens.

Ashes – As Chris drives his mother to a childhood fishing spot so that they can scatter his father's ashes, he dwells on the years of perceived injustices doled out to him by his parents. Hurting also from a recent breakup, Chris considers his mother a burden and is counting the days until he can escape her expectations. As they reach the lake, he starts to feel the weight, too, of his father, of not being accepted, of not being enough. As he feels the grainy sand of his father's ashes between his fingers, Chris sees beyond his mother's fussiness to her genuine grief. In this crack of humanity, Chris revisits his own role in his relationship with his father, wishing that he had been able to compromise years earlier.

Laminex and Mirrors – An eighteen-year-old girl takes on a hospital job over the summer holidays to save up so that she can travel to London. Although she begins the job just to earn money, she manages to collect a series of snapshots of the lives of those around her, images that put her life into perspective and give her insight into life, death, love and compassion.

Like a House on Fire – In the story that lends its name to the book, a husband looks at his life from his prostrate position on the floor. He has hurt his back and, as a result of pain and the threat of further injury, must lie still as life continues around him. Once active and competent, he now feels frustrated with his inability to move and to contribute to his family, helplessly watching as his sons become more immersed in television and lose the playfulness that he remembers from only a year earlier. As his perspective changes so, too, do the attitudes of his family.

Five-Dollar Family – A new mother waits in hospital for her milk to come in. Only days after giving birth, this mother cradles her newborn baby and lets her torn and tender body be pummelled and judged by hospital staff. Her boyfriend, a loser named Des, doesn't know what to do with himself, and she has already decided that she's leaving him behind. Determined to get one happy keepsake photo, though, she pushes through the pain, dresses her newborn and makes the three of them go to the mall for a family photo.

Cross-Country – Rebecca wallows in the dregs of her failed relationship. As she sleeps all day and surfs the internet for signs of her ex, she becomes obsessed with the idea of him as a runner. She talks about getting running shoes, joining a club and has images of herself overtaking him. This image in fact motivates her to get up again and return to work. However, she has missed something crucial in his online profile.

Sleepers – Ray is thinking about his broken relationship as he passes a new development in town that has resulted in a number of redgum sleepers being piled along the edge of the road for resale. Hyped up by gossip, despair and a dream that is yet to take shape, Ray drives out to the pile one night to load up his truck with what he believes he deserves.

Whirlpool – Anna is a young girl on the brink of adolescence who is enduring another obligatory Christmas photo. She feels judged by her mother and escapes the stuffy, false air of the house, filled with conspiratorial looks and minor betrayals, into the cool, blue freedom of their above-ground pool.

Cake – Liz, a new mother, returns to work burdened with the guilt of leaving her eighteen-month-old son at childcare. She struggles with leaving the mothering side of herself behind, which she is expected to do while at work. At home, she finds it difficult to explain her feelings to her husband as she tries to eke out precious moments with her baby boy.

White Spirit – A woman working in a block of community housing has commissioned two artists to paint a mural depicting the community within. However, as the project goes on, she starts to feel ashamed, questioning the validity of the project and its relevance to the actual community.

Little Plastic Shipwreck – Roley arrives at work one day at Oceanworld to discover that Samson the dolphin has died. As Roley becomes increasingly frustrated with the manager's cold-hearted treatment of the park's star animal, he starts to notice the dinginess of the park. In a day that climaxes when he quits and storms out through the gift shop, Roley takes home a little plastic snow globe to his wife, the once-witty woman whose brain injury means that she no longer knows to shake the souvenir for snow.

Waiting – A woman waits anxiously at a clinic for the results of her latest ultrasound. She is there following a long line of miscarriages and lost children. She hasn't even told her husband that she is pregnant, worrying for his feelings. Alone in the waiting room, she considers the procedure that has now become routine.

Static – In a story that takes place during a family's Christmas Day celebrations, Anthony tries to negotiate between his wife's and his parents' demands on him, and the image of how he'd envisaged his life would be by this point. The story is filled with characters left wanting, and so it has a sense of longing, for children, for money and for happiness.

Seventy-Two Derwents – In the story that concludes the collection, Tyler writes a journal for her teacher Mrs Carlyle. She is in Year 6 and lives at home with her mother and sister Ellie, although she has brothers and a sister who live with other families. Through the journal we learn of Shane, Tyler's mum's boyfriend, and how when he is around she feels stones grinding together in her stomach. As the drama of her family unfolds around her, Tyler clings tight to a sliver of hope that comes in the form of a tin of Derwent pencils.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND



CATE KENNEDY is the author of the highly acclaimed novel *The World Beneath*, which won the People's Choice Award in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards in 2010. She is an award-winning short-story writer whose work has been published widely. Her first collection, *Dark Roots*, was shortlisted for the Steele Rudd Award in the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards and for the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal. She is also the author of a travel memoir, *Sing, and Don't Cry*, and the poetry collections *Joyflight*, *Signs of Other Fires* and *The Taste of River Water*, which won the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Poetry in 2011. She lives on a secluded bend of the Broken River in north-east Victoria.

www.thestellaprize.com.au/2013/04/the-stella-interview-cate-kennedy/

THEMES

Identity
 Humanity
 Love
 Death
 Understanding
 Birth
 Parent-child dynamics

LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

This collection asks a lot of readers – it asks them to be **critical** and **literate** and to consider the **ethical** treatment of others within the scope of our shared humanity. Its indelible images of Australia and the landscape also offer the opportunity to consider and discuss themes such as **sustainability**.

Given the nature of short stories, and the number of platforms where short-story writers can submit their work and read the work of others, there is a real opportunity within the study of this text to promote **ICT** capabilities. Within this unit, students will have the opportunity, as the general capabilities suggest, to read, view and respond to ‘digital and multimodal texts’.

READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ How is the title of each piece relevant to the story?
- ◆ How do you feel the book title is relevant to the collection?
- ◆ What similarities can you find between each of the stories?
- ◆ What impact do you get from short stories that you don’t get from novels? What are the positive and negative aspects of them for you as a reader?
- ◆ How do each of the stories make you feel?
- ◆ Compassion is a key theme in the book. How does Cate Kennedy or her characters show compassion in each of the stories? How does this translate to feeling compassion as a reader?
- ◆ Before you start the book, write down what you think the title means.

Flexion

- ◆ How is Frank different before and after the accident?
- ◆ How does his wife’s attitude towards him change?
- ◆ Why do both of these characters change their attitudes towards each other?

Ashes

- ◆ How does Chris see his mother, and how does this make him act towards her?
- ◆ What moment changes his attitude to his father, and to his mother?
- ◆ What happens at the end to signify that something has changed between Chris and his mother?

Laminex and Mirrors

- ◆ Why does Matron hunt out Marie? Why is Matron annoyed? Why is Marie annoyed?
- ◆ What misconceptions does the main character have about Len and Dot? What changes her mind about them? What part does she have to play in this moment?
- ◆ Why is Mr Moreton both happy and sad about his daughter’s visit? Why do you think the main character decides to do what she does for him?

Like a House on Fire

- ◆ What does the title of this story refer to? (Does it fit with your suggestions for the book’s overall title from earlier?)
- ◆ What hints does the author give to suggest that the dynamic between the two adults was once different?
- ◆ How have Ben and Sam changed between this Christmas and the last? Why does this make their father sad?
- ◆ How do each of the characters compromise in the story?

Five-Dollar Family

- ◆ In what ways is Des a disappointment?
- ◆ How does the main character describe her own body at various points throughout the story?

- ◆ Why is she so determined to get this family photo?

Cross-Country

- ◆ How does Rebecca describe the differences between the grief over a loved one dying and the grief over a relationship ending?
- ◆ Why does she become so obsessed with the image of overtaking her ex while running?
- ◆ What two words unravel her thoughts?

Sleepers

- ◆ 'Just Ray' is echoed several times in this story. Who says/thinks it, and what tone does it set for Ray's character?
- ◆ Why does everyone believe that they have a right to take a share of the sleepers?
- ◆ Consider the final few sentences of the story and Ray as a character. What are the similarities between the two?

Whirlpool

- ◆ What strikes you immediately about the narrative point of view of this piece?
- ◆ What hints are there in the story about Anna's position within the family? How do they all feel about her? How does this make her feel about herself?
- ◆ What does the pool represent to the girls and their father?

Cake

- ◆ The presence of cake is repeated throughout the story and is echoed in the title. What do you think the significance of this is? How does it make Liz feel, and why?
- ◆ What roles is Liz trying to switch between? How is she finding it difficult? How do others make things more difficult?

White Spirit

- ◆ What is the importance of the mural? How does the main character feel let down by it?
- ◆ What is 'the growing sense of community ownership through collaboration'?

- ◆ What is happening differently in the reality of this community project than was intended by the theory of it?

Little Plastic Shipwreck

- ◆ How does Roley feel about Oceanworld and his job? Why doesn't he quit?
- ◆ How does the author show us the differences between Roley and Declan? How do we know Roley's opinion of Declan?

Waiting

- ◆ Before we know where the main character is or what she is there for, how does the author develop the tone of the story?
- ◆ How does she show the tension and anxiety in each of the characters? What are they worried about?
- ◆ What are the different kinds of love demonstrated in this story?

Static

- ◆ What are the 'Evil Rays'? Where are they coming from?
- ◆ What are the differences between Marie and her husband and his parents?
- ◆ What is each of the characters longing for?

Seventy-Two Derwents

- ◆ How does the author show you that the girl in this story is younger than the narrators of other stories in the book?
- ◆ Is the family rich or poor? How do you know? How do each of the characters act because of this?
- ◆ What do you know about the relationship between Ellie and her mother from Tyler's story? How does Ellie take care of Tyler?
- ◆ Why does Mrs Carlyle call the police? How does this impact Tyler?
- ◆ What are the benefits of having a young narrator? And what are the drawbacks?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. In class, discuss the short-story form. On the board or a poster write a list of features that you as a class think are important in a successful short story. Using one of the themes above as inspiration, write your own short story. It should be no more than 2000 words, and should consider the elements you have come up with in class.

2. Different publications publish quite different stories. Look into some journals (print or online) that accept short-story submissions. Read at least three stories from at least two separate editions of the journal. What elements do you feel your chosen journal looks for in a story?

Look up the submissions process for your chosen journal. This should give you information about how submissions are accepted, preferred styles, length etc. Based on this information and the stories that you have read, write a story that you feel would be suitable to be submitted to your chosen journal.

Read your story to a partner and ask for their feedback.

When you have edited your piece, submit it to the journal you have chosen.

(Publications to look at could include *Overland*, *Voiceworks*, *Kill Your Darlings* and the *Killings* blog, *Meanjin*, *Seizure*, *Sleepers Almanac* and *Southerly*, as well as university newspapers and journals.)

3. In this¹ interview, Cate Kennedy talks a lot about where she finds inspiration for her imagery and ideas. As imagery is often central to a short story, try to find a collection of pieces that you could use as an inspiration board or journal. Collect at least ten pieces. They could be quotes, images, descriptions of people or places you've been, photos, newspaper articles, any number of things. Stick these in a journal (or turn this into an online project by using a Tumblr or a blog) and write a short piece explaining the images that each item creates for you. Try to write a short creative piece based on one of these images.

¹ <http://www.abiggerbrighterworld.com/what-lights-cate-kennedys-imaginative-fire/>

REFERENCES

Reviews

Readings

www.readings.com.au/review/like-a-house-on-fire-by-cate-kennedy

Interviews

A Bigger Brighter World

www.abiggerbrighterworld.com/what-lights-cate-kennedys-imaginative-fire/

Readings

www.readings.com.au/news/helen-garner-talks-with-cate-kennedy-about-her-latest-collection-like-a-house-on-fire

Wheeler Centre Dailies

www.wheelercentre.com/dailies/post/7a73e588f275/

Writing short stories

Cate Kennedy on short stories

www.nswwc.org.au/support-for-writers/writers-about-writing/cate-kennedy-on-short-stories/

The Huffington Post: short-story tips

www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/18/short-story-tips-n_3947152.html

Kurt Vonnegut on writing stories

www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2012/04/03/kurt-vonnegut-on-writing-stories/

Short-story platforms

Express Media

www.expressmedia.org.au

Kill Your Darlings

www.killyourdarlingsjournal.com

The Lifted Brow

www.theliftebrow.com

Meanjin

www.meanjin.com.au

Overland

www.overland.org.au

Seizure

www.seizureonline.com

Sleepers Almanac

www.sleeperspublishing.com/almanac/

Southerly

www.southerlyjournal.com.au

Voiceworks

www.voiceworksmag.com.au